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Thinking Critically and Negotiating Practices in the Disciplines.

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Abstract

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Comments

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REFLECTIONS 2

THINKING CRITICALLY AND NEGOTIATING PRACTICES IN THE DISCIPLINES

David Russell in conversation with Sally Mitchell

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Sally: To ground our discussion I'm going to start with Mary Lea and Brian Street's much cited 1998 paper in which they set out a heuristic for looking at data gathered in UK universities in terms of approaches to student writing: a study skills approach/frame; a socialization approach/frame; an academic literacies approach/frame. I want to notice that it's not fully clear in the way the paper is often referred to, whether the three-part distinction is an approach or a frame. In my own thinking I don't want to commit to either, but prefer to preserve both terms; the first suggesting pedagogical practices, the second a conceptualization or stance. In her book on student writing, Theresa Lillis (2001) visited these distinctions again, adding to them "creative self-expression" as an approach and differentiating between socialization as "implicit induction into established discourse practices" and socialization involving "explicit teaching of features of academic genres." I found that further distinction useful especially in terms of thinking about how disciplinary teachers (rather than writing teachers) teach writing. She viewed the approaches to student writing as ranged along a continuum that indexed a vision of higher education as at one end "homogeneous," with "practices oriented to the reproduction of official discourses" and at the other 'heterogeneous"—and by association, "oppositional." Pedagogical practices at this end she glossed as "oriented to making visible/challenging/playing with official and unofficial discourse practices" (2001).

In our experiences, in our respective institutional contexts, which—important-

ly—are mainly "teacher-facing" rather than "student-facing," it seems to me we are often involved in interrogating this continuum in terms both of pedagogical approach and conceptual stance: what do we do? How do we conceive of what it is we do? And why? Just as the interplay between practice and stance is complex, so, we find, is the naming of these as either "normative" or "transformative," "assimilationist" or "resisting."

David: It's crucial to begin with the institutional context—and the role played within the institution. In Thinking Writing at QMUL and in North American Writing In the Disciplines programmes (WID), we do not teach language courses. In the day-to-day work of supporting writing in the disciplines (and thus thinking and learning and development more broadly), staff with expertise in academic writing/literacies (like you and me) play primarily a consulting or staff development role with faculties and departments and teachers. We try to listen carefully, understand how literacy operates in the field, department, classroom; how the teachers and students use and understand it, and we then engage them in reflecting on it. There's a lot of contact with people in other disciplines than our own (rhetoric, academic writing, applied linguistics, are some of the names on our hats). And a lot of meetings, workshops, classroom visits—perhaps to run a workshop for students with the teacher present or in collaboration with the teacher.

Working in a unit that is outside any department, with an institution-wide brief for making change (as is usually the case with WID programmes), provides a good place to think about difference and what it means to be critical, because students spend most of their time in the disciplines, not in language/writing courses (see Horner and Lillis this volume, Reflections 4). And there is automatically a great deal of "heterogeneity," because we have all those disciplines (and sub- and inter-disciplines, not to mention the professions often linked to them). When we worked together in 2005, we discussed the challenges of talking to academic staff about their goals for developing critical thinking in their courses or in the wording of their assignments; for example, "When you say you want your students to 'be critical' *what kind of critical* do you mean?" And teachers and departments may well ask us that too.

Sally: In thinking about the work we do in education and writing development, teacher-facing practice certainly complicates what being transformative at, or near, the oppositional end of Lillis's continuum might mean. Being critical can imply a challenge to the forms and functions of authoritative discourse (academic, disciplinary, neo-liberal marketization), making these the object of study and interrogation, rather than taking them as unquestioned givens in the making and communication of knowledge. An example of an oppositional stance would be to challenge

the "container metaphor" of language or the neo-liberal separation of skills from knowledge that enables institutions to separate out "content courses" from "language courses" and to place one in the service of the other (see Neculai this volume, chapter 30). A strongly critical response might then involve us declining a department's request to provide a stand-alone "study skills" course, or lead to a refusal to provide help "grading the writing" of a particular assignment while the disciplinary teacher "grades the content."

David: To pick up the example you used—refusing to serve, or service, a department or curriculum or teacher by "grading the writing" is usually tempered, in North American WID programmes at least, by the offer of different kinds of engagement: reformulating assignments, introducing peer review, collaborative teaching or research, and so on. In time (and sometimes very rapidly—because many academic teachers are creative and curious), working together on these areas can lead to critical and transformative practices—the introduction of peer assessment for example, or popular genres, or debates (John Bean, 2011). Norms then may begin to shift, to transform, both on the part of the teachers/departments and the writing/literacies staff. After all, writing/literacies experts also belong to a discipline (or proto-sub-discipline, however marginal), which can be critiqued by teachers in other disciplines.

Sally: The question of where the norm is located is also an interesting one. A shift in norms we've been talking about at work recently is the notion of "student as producer or co-producer"—of resources, curriculum and assessment. It's gaining what feels like increasing momentum in the United Kingdom—and as a contrast to "student as consumer," it feels exciting and radical. But as "student as producer" becomes a newer "norm," it is already becoming assimilated to other more pervasive, powerful agendas in the sector ("employability" is one). This doesn't mean however that a classroom or programme in which "the student as producer" becomes the new ethos isn't in some way, at some level, transformative of what had previously held sway. It's just that the promised radicalism is held in check by larger ideological frames. And, of course, even the limited radicalism driving the idea will need to be tested in practice and scrutinized through research. What does "student as producer" look like as/in practice?; what is it like for students to be socialized into this apparently new way of doing things?; what are the new warrants that will open up the new practice to criticism and resistance? Looked at this way you can't really fit any developing practices onto a single point on Lillis's continuum—they'll always be shifting about over time.

David: Yes, and indeed the very theoretical concept of a continuum at times may melt down in the crucible of teacher-facing practice, into something resembling

a multi-party negotiation, as engagements with teachers and the professionals beyond them (mutual learning and mutual transformation of practices) might occur.

Very early on, in the late 1980s, a few critics of WAC, like Daniel Mahala (1991) argued that WAC should offer a highly political, hard-edged critique of the discourse of disciplines and professions. In practice, in teacher-facing practice (redundancy intended) it is necessary to develop allies—and there are some in every discipline and university who are critical in various ways—without alienating potential allies. Writing consultants unfortunately don't have the power to make others listen to our expertise (as some language/writing teachers have the power to do with their students). Consultant experts must offer something of value to engage them in an ongoing dialog. Teachers in the disciplines who take a critical view of their own or their discipline's pedagogical practice and want to transform it often show up at our WID workshops. We consult with them or even do long range teaching change and/or research projects. It's slow work, often.

Sally: So how far did Mahala have a point, in your view? I guess I'm unsettled by the idea that writing people don't have power (though I concede you're probably right in some significant ways). But I think we can take power for ourselves too, and one way is through having some conceptual framework that articulates the assumptions on which options for practice are based. To have this gives you power—and it's also a responsibility—to know how your practice is positioned, and what assumptions (e.g., about language, knowledge, permission) it rests on. It enables you to be critical and reflexive—and to be open to challenge and change. I think the AcLits framework is useful in this regard—as a critical and reflective tool. But it shouldn't be taken as a given or an endpoint. New articulations always need to be made—one I encountered recently that I found very refreshing of my own practice was by Magnus Gustafsson and Cecilia Jacobs (2013). And Mahala's critique wasn't over once he'd voiced it, was it? From papers you've pointed me to, the strand of critical questioning and response has continued in WAC and WID—and this is a good thing.

David: I simply mean that writing *teachers*—like most university teachers—have been granted the power of the grade, the mark, by the institution, the students, and the wider society. As teachers we also have much power to determine what we teach and how. Teachers can require students to write differently or be critical (or pretend to—as some controversial ethnographic research has shown (David Seitz, 2004)). But as writing *consultants* we have not been granted the institutional or social power to remake curriculums in our critical ways—yet. We must gain that rhetorically, by persuasion, which is one reason why theories of how power operates institutionally have been important in WID research—Bruno Latour, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens. So I very much agree that our power will come from having something intellectually valuable to offer to teachers in other disciplines—but valuable in

terms of their values as well as those our own discipline(s).

The question of how oppositional and transformative practice is, and what those terms mean, and how to frame arguments for outsiders, has indeed had a long and thoughtful airing in the United States, dating back to the late 1980s, when WID programmes were first becoming numerous (and some felt—wrongly it turned out—that they would supplant required first-year composition courses). That debate often pointed to a central tension, between writing as an uncritical/unproblematic tool in the development of disciplinary and professional thinking and practice (so normative, assimilationist and with an apparently "clear mission"), and the need to contest writing as an agent in the inscription of disciplinary subjects (so resisting and critical, with a more contested mission). This debate maps onto critical approaches to academic writing elsewhere (AcLits, clearly, but also some work in SFL (systemic functional linguistics), LAP, Brazilian/Swiss pedagogical sequences, etc. (Anis Bawarshi & Mary JoReiff, 2010)), and there's longstanding and on-going debate in WID about how and how much it is and should be critical (see Charles Bazerman et al. 2005, Chapter 8 for a summary).

But North American WID approaches are also characterized, since their beginnings in the 1980s, by a different kind of critical analysis, one that grows out of research into the rhetoric of disciplines and professions and workplaces that students will enter. It seemed presumptuous to many North Americans doing WID work to be critical of the disciplines' discursive practices—or to teach their students to be literate, much less critically so—without having studied in some detail their discursive practices: what is important to them, how they go about their work, including (but not only) the literacy part. A historical and ethnographic research tradition has ensued, which investigates how knowledge and power are produced and circulate in the documentary networks of institutions in their practices *over time* (as both historical and long-term ethnographic methods make time central). (For reviews see Bazerman, 2008; Bazerman et al. 2005, Chapters 6 and 7; David Russell, 2001, 2007, 2008).

The goal here is to inform a critical approach to supporting writing in the disciplines that takes into account *both* the affordances *and* constraints of disciplinary and professional discourse. By looking carefully at how discourses work it is possible to formulate not only a backward looking critique of how disciplinary discourses limit students, but also a forward looking critique to discern the potential in disciplinary discourses for students to develop knowledge and power—and eventually transform institutions (and their discourse) in positive ways, as the students become professionals with power. Dorothy Smith's study of the documentary organization of medical practice, for example, reveals its deep sexism, but it also shows how it saves lives, through organizing care (checklists for the surgical procedures, etc.) (see Dorothy Smith & Catherine Schryer, 2008 for an overview of these studies). Dorothy Winsor's study of textual power negotiations in engineer-

ing practice (2003) shows deep class exploitation, but it also shows how exploited workers exercise agency textually. Anthony Paré's study of Inuit social workers (2002) reveals the racism of the Canadian social work profession but also the ways native social workers negotiate the circulation of knowledge to enhance the power and autonomy of their communities. Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry's study of professionals doing academic research outside the Anglophone centers of power (2010) is consonant with WID research in significant ways, as it exposes not only the hegemonic practices and their effects but also the textual dynamics of that power and the agentive and resistance potentials for the future.

This is why cultural-historical activity theory and Carolyn Miller's theory of genre as social action (1984) have been important in this tradition. They emphasize the historical and dynamic quality of academic/professional discourses, and their ties to changing practices (see Charles Bazerman & James Paradis, Eds., 1985, and for research methods used see Charles Bazerman & Paul Prior, 2004).

Historical and ethnographic—especially longitudinal—studies of writing in HE, as well as in the professions beyond HE, provide insight into what I call forward looking critique. Again, as the metaphor suggests, time is key. Writing/language teachers typically have students only one or two terms (unless they are preparing writing/language teachers or researchers). But staff in the disciplines often have them for three or more years, and the department's reputation is at stake in their preparation, as well as the future of the profession they prepare them for—as are people's and society's safety, health, and so on, in the case of many disciplines/professions. So the time scale is different in the disciplines, as are the stakes.

Encountering teachers and departments in a range of disciplines other than one's own (e.g., writing studies) suggests ways to reframe the assimilation/transformation dichotomy. Every future professional must "assimilate" to the extent of assuming the identity of a professional in that field (otherwise she will not be able to participate or exert agency or, indeed, write in the discipline/profession). For students—especially those from marginalized groups—entering a profession is transformative in terms of their lives, and in terms of their potential agency, their chances in life and their chance to make a difference. And in a collective sense, every discipline/profession/institution will be transformed, in ways large and small, by the changing conditions of its practice and the agency of its practitioners—or it will become obsolete. Transformation, like assimilation, is inevitable, and the two go hand in hand—but on different time scales. The question then is what sorts of assimilation and what sorts of transformation occur, not only within individuals, but also within broader social formations/institutions? And what is the role of the writing/literacies expert in shaping those things?

Sally: For me that last question goes back to the position taken by the literacies expert—how strongly critical they want or are able to be. I go along with Miller's

understanding of genre as in a sense having transformation built in (as she says, "genres change, evolve and decay"), but I think sometimes in our work with disciplines we can influence, critically and creatively, the way genres, particularly the genres that carry teaching and learning along, change and evolve. I like your point about historical and ethnographic studies. The value of ethnography that includes observations of classrooms etc. is that it tends to work against the hardening of categories. Ethnography encourages "a willingness to accept (and run with) the fact that … experience has ways of boiling over and making us correct our current formulas" (W. James, 1978, in Ben Rampton et al., 2004, quoted in Lillis, 2008, p. 376). I'm quite interested in how the Lea and Street categories (derived from an ethnographic type study, of course) have given rise to some anxiety that they are mutually exclusive, that you're in one camp or the other—assimilationist or transforming. It seems a curious reaction to the heuristic.

David: We in North America have certainly seen these kinds of categories complicated, at times transmuted, in the crucible of practice, as I have suggested. Context again is absolutely key. The ethnographic turn in rhetoric and composition studies came in the 1980s in North America, with the proliferation of WAC/WID programmes. Much of that research was practitioner-based, as writing consultants collaborated with teachers in the disciplines. McCarthy's seminal 1987 article, "A Stranger in Strange Lands" gave us a first window on a student struggling to cope with writing in multiple disciplines. There followed a large number of ethnographic studies including eleven longitudinal studies of undergraduates—some following students from the first year of HE into several years of professional practice—involving sustained engagement between researcher and participants and drawing on multiple methods in addition to talk around texts. A recent major review of these studies of student writing at university (Paul Rogers, 2008), as well as research reviews of qualitative studies (Russell, 2001) and studies in technical communication (Russell, 2007), suggest that the WID work has much in common with AcLits research—including a lively debate over the meaning of "critical" in ethnography and the ethical representation of the "other," especially in relation to teaching practice (Russell et al., 2009; Jerry Stinnett, 2012).

Indeed, in my view, the most useful recent large scale study of writing in the disciplines is by Roz Ivanič and her team (2009) in Scotland and England. This was the product of two years of collaborative research with teachers in three disciplines in further education colleges, what we call community colleges in the United States. It involved their multi-modal text production in and outside of class, their motives—assimilationist and beyond—as well as interventions the teachers developed and made, in consultation with the writing experts, and their reactions to them.

Ivanič et al. are quite aware that having a critique is not enough; one has to have a pedagogy to enact and develop that critique. And as part of that, I would argue,

students must learn the (discourse) practices of their disciplines and professions, as I mentioned before, or they will fail their courses—and will have far less agency for transforming professional practices or discourses. WID has a variety of common pedagogical strategies centered around encouraging critical thinking through writing awareness (Bean, 2011) and around encouraging critique of the disciplines by viewing genres as dynamic and linked to practices—often by having students do ethnographic investigations in one way or another (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, Chapter 11). Many disciplines now have a literature on writing in that discipline. Few of these have an explicit goal to challenge the dominant discourses. But in practice, they may be taken up in ways that do that.

Sally: Certainly I've found that disciplinary teachers can be innovative and playful in taking their students towards the disciplinary thinking and forms that they value. If the conditions are right they are creative and relaxed about setting "divergent" writing tasks (dialogues, questions, postcards …) that can give rise to startling articulations of sharp disciplinary thinking. The writing tasks are perhaps unusual (transformative of the default pedagogy, perhaps you could say?) but far from "oppositional": the concern is to socialize—to make the students better students and graduates of whatever discipline; and for themselves, the concern is to become better teachers of students in their discipline (which seems to me to be generally more accurate and richer than simply saying "better teachers of their discipline").

David: I like your formulation "teachers of students in their discipline," which puts the emphasis on students—without forgetting the discipline. I might add "teachers of students in and for their discipline," as the students hopefully leave HE to enter specialized forms of work and knowledge-making.

Sally: Assimilation, then, or transformation?!

David: Well, both certainly, and many things in between and around the dichotomy or continuum or negotiation. Writing in the Disciplines, since its origin in the massification of North American HE in the 1970s, has tried more or less successfully to position itself as an *educational reform movement*. In 1989, Sue McLeod described WID Programs as doing "transformational" work, in the sense that they explicitly push for ways of viewing writing that go beyond the dominant remedial, deficit model and move towards writing as a way of supporting critical thinking, learning development and "academic success,"—by which HE generally means graduation and a job in one's chosen field. One goal of having a WAC/WID programme at one's university is to call attention to the invisible practices of writing and teaching and learning and to make the institution aware of them. As a result, WAC/WID has encountered a great deal of ongoing resistance—but at the same time it has managed currently to be a feature of over half of all HE and of 65% of PhD degree-granting

institutions in the United States (Chris Thaiss & Tara Porter, 2010).

Quite a degree of success, but of course there's still work to be done. One area is in addressing some of the issues around race, class, gender and language background that have been the subject of research and discussion within the more confined and controllable spaces of Composition. As we've been discussing, this is less straightforward for WID consultants who must form and maintain alliances in institutional spaces where these issues may have relatively lower priority than in English departments. It'll be interesting—and important—to see how the recent critique of WID in this regard is developed and responded to (Anne Herrington & Charles Moran, 2006).

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